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MEDICINES USED BY THE MICMAC INDIANS

By WILSON D. WALLIS

THE following list of diseases and their treatment was obtained by the author from native informants of the Micmac tribe (settlement at Pictou Landing, Nova Scotia) in the summers of 1911 and 1912. This information I submitted to Dr. Wilson Wood, then of the faculty of the Medical School of the University of Pennsylvania, who furnished observations regarding the value of the cures which are here appended. Dr. Wood's observations have been put in brackets. Many of these remedies, like many of the diseases, are of European origin.

Diarrhoea. "Wild Chocolate" (*egwitkewe*) will stop it gradually, though not suddenly.

Purgatives. The bark of easel when boiled into a tea is a purgative if, after taking, the abdomen is rubbed from above downward; if rubbed from below upward it causes vomiting. Pipe-stem wood (alder?) (*niskAnAmusi*) is a good physic. If boiled and mixed with the fat from any part of a porcupine it is as effective as castor oil. [The good effect of this combination is presumably due to the fat which is laxative, while alder bark, containing tannic acid, would tend to the opposite effect.] Molasses [molasses is also laxative] and lard combined is said to be a good physic much used by adults; a new-born child is given as a physic the fatty oil of the raccoon or porcupine. The root and bark of the gooseberry vine are scraped and mixed with grease and a little sugar. "It will go right through you." No ill effects ensue from getting wet or from working while taking this physic. *SAgebAnigewe* (a species of wild carrot?), a red blossom plant with three leaves clustered around the stalk, growing along brooks, is steeped, and is a mild purgative. The roots of *ukskusaligAn*, a plant growing in low swampy places, is beaten until soft, then tied around the waist much as a poultice would be applied. It is declared to be as effective as salts.

Whooping cough. Mix skunk grease with the grease from the red squirrel and perhaps a little of the fat of the latter. It induces vomiting and insures recovery. A dose should be given three or four times a day. [It is quite possible that this nauseous dose does cause vomiting and so relieve the spasm of coughing by effecting a general relaxation but it can have no effect on the course of the malady.]

Colds, coughs, and la grippe. The tea of hemlock bark and of the bark and needles and twigs of the white pine are used. [The volatile oils contained in these evergreens have long been credited with a good effect in bronchitis. This is probably due to the fact that they stimulate the bronchial secretions in their passage through the lungs.] A tea is made from the bark of moose wood and of wild turnip pounded together and sweetened.

Ground- or spruce-hemlock is boiled and whiskey added. This is good for the bowels also, and for any internal trouble. The bark of the black spruce [see preceding brackets] and of the white maple of second growth, i.e., the shoots from the stump of an old tree, are scraped and steeped. A physic should be taken prior to a dose of this.

The tops and leaves of *mAsusidjAl*, "sweet palm," are boiled. This will also ward off consumption and gradually, not quickly, cure diarrhoea.

The *kaad jumAnAktsi* (literally, "crow's nest plant,"—the mistletoe?) is a good medicine for any ailment, especially for colds and particularly in the case of infants. The staghorn sumach (*Rhus typhira* or *hirta*) is good for sore throat. [The astringent properties of the tannic acid contained herein would account for the good result.] The *mAdaweswalu* (Yarrow, *Achillea millefolium*) cures a cold by inducing a sweat. [Yarrow and juniper contain volatile oils which, acting as a counterirritant and relieving pain, may account for its reputation in sprains and bruises.] It should be boiled about an hour and taken in warm milk. In about a half hour it causes the patient to sweat and drives out the cold. Lay it on coals for about half an hour, leaving it there until thoroughly dried, then remove and mash with a stone into a fine powder. Rub this dry powder, using

for this purpose bark or green leaves, over a swelling, bruise, or sprain, and on the following day a cure will be effected. *Tcigawabi*, "bass root," is good for a cold or for sore eyes.

Cuts and wounds. Tea from the bark of the white spruce is a good salve; musk-rat roots (*kiweswusk*) for open wounds. Resin and mutton tallow are used. [The mutton tallow acts merely as a protectant. The resin is slightly antiseptic. Juniper is also used for this purpose by the Hudson Bay Indians.] *Tcigawabi*, spikenard, is boiled until it becomes soft, then applied to the wound. For a severe cut wash the wound with castile soap and apply bees' wax; remove this and apply mutton tallow. The wound will soon heal. Juniper gum will make it heal too rapidly. If you put juniper gum [see preceding brackets] on a wound it will heal so quickly you will think you have never been cut. "I knew an Englishman who cut his knee badly into the bone. He put human excrement on it, tied it on with bandages, then covered it over with balsam to keep the odor in. In two or three weeks the flesh and bone were entirely healed. Another man broke his collarbone when firing a gun. An old Indian woman from Restigouche put excrement and balsam gum on it and cured it." Red willow chewed up fine and placed on a fresh cut will stop bleeding. Bark of white pine scraped and boiled until soft, mixed with grease, will cure a wound. To stop bleeding chew the leaves of the pigeon-berry plant until they become soft and pliable and apply to the wound. Boil alder bush until the bark is soft, then remove it. This will be done almost immediately after the boiling point is reached. If it boils long it will get too strong. Chew and swallow it for bleeding or for hemorrhage of the lungs. [These all contain tannic acid which when *locally* applied tends to stop bleeding by constricting the blood vessels. The natural inference among the ignorant that they would also be beneficial in hemorrhage from the lungs is without foundation.] Drink the sap and water found in the little bark on pine trees, mixed with a little warm water, for hemorrhage. Relief will be given almost instantly.

Tuberculosis of the lungs. When getting tuberculosis move around outside and do not spit on the floor. Peel the bark

from a juniper tree as far up as possible. Then cut the tree down. In the wood, which has been until then covered by the bark, you will find little lumps. Cut these and get the sap which exudes from them. Mix this with brandy and allow to stand over night. Scrape off a small amount of skunk-cabbage and add to this. When better, take a physic to purify the blood. A walk in the morning and one in the evening will further aid recovery.

Defective hearing. The urine from a porcupine's bladder dropped into the ear and kept there by wads of cotton will improve defective hearing.

Earache. Pour into the ear either tea from boiled sumach, or that from skunk grease. [The oil retains heat which relieves the pain.]

Sore or weak eyes. Pour vinegar on a porous pebble, allow to dry, then tie the pebble over the eye. The vinegar will go into the eyeball and cure sore eyes or defective sight. The sore eyes of a man are cured by the urine of a little girl about four or five years old; those of a woman by the urine of a boy of about that age. "When I injured my eyes last year I treated them with the urine of a little girl about a year and a half old. But for that I should have been entirely blind. Now my eyes are as well as ever they were. Do not tell any one what you are doing, but if your eyes become sore and you have the opportunity, try the urine of a little girl."¹

Toothache. Scrape the bark of *kAldjimAnAksi* (wax root) and steep it. Place this on cotton and put in the affected tooth. Wash the face in cold water, throw the water away, and forget about the tooth and the water. (This is European.)

Headache. Tie skunk-cabbage up in a bundle and smell it. [Nervous or hysterical headache may be relieved by this ill-smelling plant. Bad odors seem to have a beneficial psychic effect in such conditions.] Do the same with the roots of the wax-berry plant. The shed skin of a snake worn in the hat-band or tied around the head will cure headache. One old man dis-

¹ The belief in the efficacy of human urine is very widely spread in primitive culture as well as among the European peasantry. The belief that one must use the urine of the opposite sex is also commonly found—as, e.g., in Australia.

approved of this because of aversion to snakes. Grate wax-berry root fine and snuff it.

Rheumatism. Rub with raccoon or, better, skunk grease. Porcupine grease is equally good. [These oils merely facilitate massage.] The grease is procured by skimming the broth. The fat of the turtle is a good lubricant, also the contents of the gall bladder of any animal.

Sprains. Wrap juniper balsam around the affected part with eel skin or merely apply the eel skin as a tight bandage. "My wife had sprained her back and could not walk without putting each hand on a knee; juniper gum cured her." A plaster of juniper gum will remove the soreness and all the pain. The plaster will move around of itself and will not stay in one place long, no matter on what part of the body it be put. "A man was badly injured by a fall and unable to sit or walk about. My grandmother's mother told the people to put juniper gum on the helpless portions of his body. He was soon sitting up straight and was as well as any one."

Childbirth. Fresh milk and boiled ground-hemlock (not too strong) are given to the mother. [Ground hemlock yew is used by ignorant Negroes in the southern states to produce abortion but has caused many fatalities.] A tea made from the black haw or stag-bush sloe (*Viburnum pomifolium*) is given to women both before and during parturition. A tradition is current to the effect that the Virgin Mary carried this latter plant around with her when she was with child. [Viburnum is credited with distinct virtues by many physicians, but there is grave doubt of its real value.]

Colic. The tops or combs of balsam fir make a tea which cures colic. [The volatile oil in balsam gives a sense of warmth and comfort in the stomach, grateful in mild cases of colic.] The bark of the round-tree (*epsimusi*) shrub is cut off and chewed raw to alleviate a pain in the stomach.

Diphtheria. Drink tea made from alder bark.

Convulsions. To cure a person of fits, cut the feet from a mole or from a mole skin and place these on any part of his body. If possible open the patient's mouth and put one of them down

his throat. If you cannot get the feet split, open the skin and scrape the inside of it. This will cure for the time being, but not permanently. A final cure is effected by the use of the codfish louse, a parasite found on the gills or other part of the cod. My informant told me of one case in which a woman was cured in a few hours by hanging a piece of this, sewed in canvas, around her neck so as to fall over her chest. She had suffered an entire summer. It is essential that the patient should not know what is effecting the cure.

Worms. Eat dults, a seaweed, raw.

Saltrheum. Apply axle-grease.

Ringworm. Spit on ink powder and rub this on the afflicted part.

Corns. Rub with the sulphur from matches.

Measles. Drink the fresh dung of sheep dissolved in water. Previously the dung of deer was used. This will drive the measles out and insure speedy recovery.

Kidneys. Whenever there is any trouble with the urine, use the tea of white pine. [Tea made from white pine will cause an increase in the action of the kidneys, chiefly because of the large amount of water, but also to a slight extent from the stimulating effect of the volatile oil of pine.]

Festers. For festers or a fevered body cover the entire body with alder leaves, first pulling out the stems. Allow them to remain on until they wither, when a cure is effected. If it is winter and the leaves can not be had, cover the body with alder bark.

Smallpox. Drink a strong potion of princess pine, black cherry bark, wild turnip, beavers, castors, and honey. Take a teaspoonful morning and evening. Smallpox is severe on Indians (they say) because of the texture of their skin. That of white people breaks easily, whereas the skin of the Indian is very tough.

Miscellaneous. If a dog gets porcupine quills in it, feed it fat pork; the quills will then pass out of the animal's body.

The buttercup is good for cancer. It should be laid over the diseased part and will draw out the sickness.

Gold-root (*wisakiwes*) chewed raw will cure chapped or cut lips.

Lamb-kill (*kagipul* or, more commonly, *nebitck*) will draw out the pain from a disaffected part of the body. For this purpose it should be pounded into a powder, mixed with oatmeal porridge, and applied as a poultice.

The roots of *kuldjimAnaksil* (*Myrica cirifera*), wax myrtle, will cure inflammation. They should be pounded, soaked in water, and applied at a temperature almost that of the boiling point.

Wabegpagosi, the rough cow parsnip (*Heracleum sphondylium*), when green and light in color, is good medicine for women; when dark and ripier it is good for men.

The buttercup, the virtues of which have already been recorded, is effective medicine if picked after coming from church service on St. Anne's day (July 26th), but not when gathered on other days.

In concluding his observations regarding these remedies of the Micmac, Dr. Wood says: "Many of the statements made by the author's informant are obviously too indefinite to understand or criticise. Most of the practices recommended are unquestionably based on superstition and some if followed must be absolutely harmful. A few seem to be the result of favorable experience and have their analogues in methods employed by more civilized peoples. Nearly all of these, however, are, as might be expected, extremely crude."

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